

Kentucky Is My Fate

If one has chosen to live mindfully, then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live. Choosing to return to the land and landscape of my childhood, the world of my Kentucky upbringing, I am comforted by the knowledge that I could die here. This is the way I imagine “the end”: I close my eyes and see hands holding a Chinese red lacquer bowl, walking to the top of the Kentucky hill I call my own, scattering my remains as though they are seeds and not ash, a burnt offering on solid ground vulnerable to the wind and rain — all that is left of my body gone, my being shifted, passed away, moving forward on and into eternity. I imagine this farewell scene and it solaces me; Kentucky hills were where my life began. They represent the place of promise and possibility and the location of all my terrors, the monsters that follow me and haunt my dreams. Freely roaming Kentucky hills in childhood, running from snakes and all forbidden outside terrors, both real and imaginary, I learn to be safe in the knowledge that facing what I fear and moving beyond it will keep me secure. With this knowledge I nurtured a sublime trust in the power of nature to seduce, excite, delight, and solace.

Nature was truly a sanctuary, a place of refuge, a place for healing wounds. Heeding the call to be one with nature, I returned to the one

state where I had known a culture of belonging. My life in Kentucky, my girlhood life, is divided into neat lines demarcating before and after. Before is the isolated life we lived as a family in the Kentucky hills, a life where the demarcations of race, class, and gender did not matter. What mattered was the line separating country and city — nature mattered. My life in nature was the Before and the After was life in the city where money and status determined everything. In the country our class had no importance. In our home we were surrounded by hills. Only the front windows of our house looked out on a solitary road constructed for the men seeking to find oil, all other windows faced hills. In our childhood, the rarely traveled road held no interest. The hills in the back of our house were the place of magic and possibility, a lush green frontier, where nothing man made could run us down, where we could freely seek adventure.

When we left the hills to settle in town where the schools were supposedly better, where we could attend the big important church, Virginia Street Baptist (all things we were told would make us better, would make it possible for us to be somebody), I experienced my first devastating loss, my first deep grief. I wanted to stay in the solitude of those hills. I longed for freedom. That longing was imprinted on my consciousness in the hills that seemed to declare that all sweetness in life would come when we seek freedom. Folks living in the Kentucky hills prized independence and self-reliance above all traits.

While my early sense of identity was shaped by the anarchic life of the hills, I did not identify with being Kentuckian. Racial separatism, white exploitation and oppression of black folks were so widespread, it pained my already hurting heart. Nature was the place where one could escape the world of man-made constructions of race and identity. Living isolated in the hills we had very little contact with the world of white dominator culture. Away from the hills, dominator culture and its power over our lives were constant. Back then all black people knew that the white supremacist State with all its power did not care for the welfare of black folks. What we had learned in the

hills was how to care for ourselves by growing crops, raising animals, living deep in the earth. What we had learned in the hills was how to be self-reliant.

Nature was the foundation of our counter-hegemonic black sub-culture. Nature was the place of victory. In the natural environment, everything had its place, including humans. In that environment everything was likely to be shaped by the reality of mystery. There dominator culture (the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) could not wield absolute power. For in that world, nature was more powerful. Nothing and no one could completely control nature. In childhood I experienced a connection between an unspoiled natural world and the human desire for freedom.

Folks who lived in the hills were committed to living free. Hill-billy folk chose to live above the law, believing in the right of each individual to determine the manner in which they would live their lives. Living among Kentucky mountain folk was my first experience of a culture based on anarchy. Folks living in the hills believed that freedom meant self-determination. One might live with less, live in a makeshift shack and yet feel empowered because the habits of informing daily life were made according to one's own values and beliefs. In the hills individuals felt they had governance over their lives. They made their own rules.

Away from the country, in the city, rules were made by unknown others and were imposed and enforced. In the hills of my girlhood, white and black folks often lived in a racially integrated environment, with boundaries determined more by chosen territory than race. The notion of "private property" was an alien one; the hills belonged to everyone or so it seemed to me in my childhood. In those hills there was nowhere I felt I could not roam, nowhere I could not go.

Living in the city I learned the depths of white subordination of black folks. While we were not placed on reservations, black folks were forced to live within boundaries in the city, ones that were not formally demarcated, but boundaries marked by white supremacist violence

against black people if lines were crossed. Our segregated black neighborhoods were sectioned off, made separate. At times they abutted the homes of poor and destitute white folks. Neither of these groups lived near the real white power and privilege governing all our lives.

In public school in the city we were taught that Kentucky was a border state, a state that did not take an absolute position on the issue of white supremacy, slavery, and the continued domination of black folks by powerful whites. In school we were taught to believe that Kentucky was not like the deep South. No matter that segregation enforced by violence shaped these institutions of learning, that schools took children regularly to the Jefferson Davis monument, to places where the confederacy and the confederate flag were praised. To black folks it seemed strange that powerful Kentucky white folks could act as though a fierce white supremacy did not exist in “their” state. We saw little difference between the ways black folks were exploited and oppressed in Kentucky and the lives of black folks in other parts of the South, places like Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. By the time I graduated from high school, my yearning to leave Kentucky had intensified. I wanted to leave the fierce racial apartheid that governed the lives of black folks. I wanted to find the place of freedom.

Yet it was my flight from Kentucky, my traveling all the way to the west coast, to California, that revealed to me the extent to which my sense and sensibility were deeply informed by the geography of place. The year I began my undergraduate education at Stanford University there were few students coming there from the state of Kentucky. I was certainly the only black student from Kentucky. And the prevailing social mores of racism meant that white Kentuckians did not seek my company. It was during this first year at Stanford that I realized the stereotypes about Kentucky that prevailed in the world beyond our region. Few folks there, at Stanford, knew anything about life in Kentucky. Usually, when asked where I hailed from, naming Kentucky as my home state would be greeted with laughter. Or with the question. “Kentucky — where is that?”

Every now and then in those undergraduate years I would meet a fellow student who was sincere in their desire to hear about life in Kentucky, and I would talk about the natural world there, the lushness of our landscape, the waterfall at Blue Lake where I played as a child. I would talk about the caves and the trails left by the displaced Cherokee Indians. I would talk about an Appalachia that was black and white, about the shadow of cold dust on the bodies of black men coming home from working in the mines. I would talk about fields of tobacco, about the horses that make the Kentucky bluegrass a field of enchantment. I would talk with pride about the black male jockeys who were at the center of the horse racing events before imperialist white supremacist capitalist imposed rigid rules of racial segregation forcing black folks away from the public world of Kentucky horse culture.

Separating black folks, especially black jockeys, from the world of Kentucky horse culture went hand in hand with the rise in white supremacist thinking. For us it meant living with a culture of fear where we learned to fear the land, the animals, where we became fearful of the moist munching mouths of horses black jockeys would rarely ride again. This separation from nature and the concomitant fear it produced, fear of nature and fear of whiteness, was the trauma shaping black life. In our psycho history, meaning the culture of southern black folk living during the age of fierce legally condoned racial apartheid, the face of terror will always be white. And symbols of that whiteness will always engender fear. The confederate flag, for example, will never stand for heritage for black folks. It still awakens fear in the minds and imaginations of elder black folks for whom it signaled the support of a white racist assault on blackness.

White folks who mask their denial of white supremacy by mouthing slogans like “heritage not hate” to support their continued allegiance to this flag, fail to see that their refusal to acknowledge what this “heritage” means for black folks is itself an expression of white racist power and privilege. For the confederate flag is a symbol of both heritage and hate. The history of the confederacy will always evoke the

memory of white oppression of black folks with rebel flags, guns, fire, and the hanging noose — all symbols of hate. And even though many poor and disenfranchised white Kentuckians struggling to make their way through the minefield of capitalist white power mimic and claim this history of colonial power, they can never really possess the power and privilege of capitalist whiteness. They may embrace this symbol to connect them to that very world and that past which denied their humanity, but it will never change the reality of their domination by those very same forces of white supremacist hegemony.

Growing up in that world of Kentucky culture where the racist aspect of the confederate past was glorified, a world that for the most part attempted to obscure and erase the history of black Kentuckians, I could not find a place for myself in this heritage. Even though I can now see in retrospect that there were always two competing cultures in Kentucky, the world of mainstream white supremacist capitalist power and the world of defiant anarchy that championed freedom for everyone. And the way in which that culture of anarchy had distinct anti-racist dimensions accounts for the unique culture of Appalachian black folks that is rarely acknowledged. It is this culture Loyal Jones writes about in *Appalachian Values* when he explains: “Many mountaineers, as far South as Alabama and Georgia were anti-slavery in sentiment and fought for the Union in the Civil War, and although Reconstruction legislatures imposed anti-Negro laws, thus training us in segregation, Appalachians for the most part, have not been saddled with the same prejudices against black people that other southerners have.” Even though I spent my early childhood around mountain white folks who did not show overt racism, and even though this world of racial integration in Kentucky hills had been a part of my upbringing, shaping my sense and sensibility, our move away from that culture into the mainstream world and its values meant that it was white supremacy which shaped and informed the nature of our lives once we were no longer living in the hills. It was this legacy of racial threat and hate that engendered in me the desire to leave Kentucky and not return.

Leaving Kentucky I believed I would leave the terror of whiteness behind but that fear followed me. Away from my native place I learned to recognize the myriad faces of racism, racial prejudice and hatred, the shape-shifting nature of white supremacy. During my first year at Stanford University, I felt for the first time the way in which geographical origins could separate citizens of the same nation. I did not feel a sense of belonging at Stanford University, I constantly felt like an unwanted outsider. Just as I found solace in nature in Kentucky, the natural environment, trees, grass, plants, the sky in Palo Alto, California, all offered me a place of solace. Digging in the California ground my hands touched earth that was so different from the moist red and brown dirt of Kentucky I felt awe. Wonder permeated my senses as I pondered the fact that traveling thousands of miles away from my native place had actually changed the very ground under my feet. Then I could not understand how the earth could be my witness in this strange land if it could not be a mirror into which I could see reflected the world of my ancestors, the landscape of my dreams. How could this new land hold me upright, provide me the certainty that the ground of my being was sound?

Seeking an experience of intellectual life in the academic world I entered an environment based on principles of uncertainty, an opportunistic world where everything changes and ends. I longed to return to my native place where there was fierce reluctance to accept change. Kentucky is one of the states in our nation known for its hard-headed refusal to embrace change. In the old days most Kentucky folks wanted everything to pass down from generation to generation unchanged. This refusal to promote change was most evident in the arena of race relations. White folks in the state of Kentucky kept racial segregation the norm long after other states had made significant progress in the direction of civil rights.

Conservative white Kentuckians told themselves “the blacks don’t want change — they like the way things are.” Having reduced black folks to a state of traumatic powerlessness, racist white folks saw no

problem with the intimate racial terrorism that they enacted which led them to believe that they could know the mind and hearts of black folks, that they could own our desires. Efforts on the part of conservative white Kentuckians to exploit and oppress black folk were congruent with the effort to erase and destroy the rebellious sensibility of white mountain folk. The anarchist spirit which had surfaced in the culture of white hillbillies was as much a threat to the imperialist white supremacist capitalist state as any notion of racial equality and racial integration. Consequently this culture, like the distinctive habits of black agrarian folk, had to be disrupted and ultimately targeted for destruction.

Leaving Kentucky, fleeing the psycho history of traumatic powerlessness, I took with me from the sub-cultures of my native state (mountain folk, hillbillies, Appalachians) a positive understanding of what it means to know a culture of belonging, that cultural legacy handed down to me by my ancestors. In her book *Rebalancing the World*, Carol Lee Flinders defines a culture of belonging as one in which there is “intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, expressiveness, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing, playfulness, inclusiveness, nonviolent conflict resolution, and openness to spirit.” All these ways of belonging were taught to me in my early childhood but these imprints were covered over by the received biased knowledge of dominator culture. Yet they become the subjugated knowledge that served to fuel my adult radicalism.

Living away from my native place, I become more consciously Kentuckian than I was when I lived at home. This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one’s perception of the world of home. The differences geographical location imprinted on my psyche and habits of being became more evident away from home. In Kentucky no one had thought I had a Kentucky accent, but in California speaking in the soft black southern

vernacular that was our everyday speech made me the subject of unwanted attention. In a short period of time I learned to change my way of speaking, to keep the sounds and cadences of Kentucky secret, an intimate voice to be heard only by folks who could understand. Not speaking in the tongue of my ancestors was a way to silence ridicule about Kentucky. It was a way to avoid being subjugated by the geographical hierarchies around me which deemed my native place country, backwards, a place outside time. I learned more about Kentucky during my undergraduate years as I placed the portrait of a landscape I knew intimately alongside the stereotypical way of seeing that world as it was represented by outsiders.

Perhaps my greatest sense of estrangement in this new liberal college environment was caused by the overall absence among my professors and peers of any overtly expressed belief in Christianity and God. Indeed, it was far more cool in those days to announce that one was agnostic or atheist than to talk about belief in God. Coming from a Bible-toting, Bible-talking world where scripture was quoted in everyday conversations, I lacked the psychological resources and know-how to positively function in a world where spiritual faith was regarded with as much disdain as being from the geographical south. In my dormitory the one student who openly read from scripture, a quiet white male student from a Mormon background, was more often than not alone and isolated. We talked to one another and endeavored to make each other feel less like strangers in a strange land. We talked scripture. But talking scripture was not powerful enough to erase the barriers created by racism that had taught us to fear and beware difference. And even though there were organized Christian groups on campus, they did not speak the religious language I was accustomed to hearing.

By the end of my second year of college, I began to question the religious beliefs of my family, the way of religion I had been taught back home. In the new age spiritual environment of California, I fash-

ioned a spirituality that made sense to my mind and heart. I worshipped in a manner that was in tune with divine spirit as I had come to know it in the hills of my Kentucky upbringing. Growing up I had always been torn between the righteous religious fundamentalism of those who practiced according to organized church doctrine and dictates and the nature-worshipping ecstatic mystical spirituality of the backwoods. All through my college years, even during those times when my soul was racked by doubt, I held onto core beliefs in the power of divine spirit.

My college years began that process of feeling split in my mind and heart which characterized my life in all the places I moved to: California, Wisconsin, Connecticut, Ohio, New York. At heart I saw myself as a country girl, an eccentric product of the sense and sensibility of the Kentucky backwoods and yet the life I lived was one where different ethics, values, and beliefs ruled the day. My life away from Kentucky was full of contradictions. The issues of honesty and integrity that had made life clear and simple growing up were an uneasy fit with the academic and literary world I had chosen as my own. In time the split mind that had become my psychic landscape began to unravel. As I experienced greater success as an intellectual and a writer, I felt I was constantly working to make my core truths have visibility and meaning in a world where the values and beliefs I wanted to make the foundation of my life had no meaning. Still and all, I did not feel that I could come home. The self I had invented in these other worlds seemed too unconventional for Kentucky, too cosmopolitan.

Like many writers, especially southerners, who have stayed away from their native place, who live in a state of mental exile, the condition of feeling split was damaging, caused a breaking down of the spirit. Healing that spirit meant for me remembering myself, taking the bits and pieces of my life and putting them together again. In remembering my childhood and writing about my early life, I was mapping the territory, discovering myself, and finding homeplace — seeing clearly that Kentucky was my fate.

The intense suicidal melancholia that had ravished my spirit in girlhood, in part a response to leaving the hills, leaving a world of freedom, had not been left behind. It followed me to all the places I journeyed. And the familiar grief which kept me awake at night, crying, longing, stayed present wherever I went, bringing in its wake the experience of traumatic powerlessness. The nighttime terrors that were there in Kentucky, the wild horses that roamed my nights leaving me crazed and sleep-deprived followed me. The inability to sleep that was a constant in girlhood was even more exacerbated the farther I journeyed from my childhood home. Many times I would lie in pitch dark rooms away from Kentucky and imagine all the ways I could create my own homeplace. Yet all my efforts to start over always ended up taking me back to the past, allowing it to serve as foundation for the present.

When in doubt about the direction of my life, I would imagine myself as a filmmaker, creating an autobiographical film entitled *Kentucky Is My Fate*. The first frames of the film are all shots of nature, shots of tobacco fields, tobacco farms, tobacco barns. I enter this filmic narrative as a witness: Baba, mama's mother, is braiding tobacco leaves, readying them to be hung, for placing in closets and trunks to keep moths and other cloth-eating pests away. Much of this imaginary film focuses on the elders whose presence dominated my childhood.

When I left my native place for the first time, I brought with me two artifacts from home that were emblematic of my growing up life: braided tobacco leaves and the crazy quilt Baba, mama's mother, had given me when I was a young girl. These two totems were to remind me always of where I come from and who I am at my core. They stand between me and the madness that exile makes, the brokenheartedness. They are present in my new life to shield me from death, to remind me that I can always return home. Each year of my life as I went home to visit, it was a rite of passage to reassure myself that I still belonged, that I had not become so changed that I could not come home again.

My visits home almost always left me torn: I wanted to stay but I needed to leave, to be endlessly running away from home.

Madness was more acceptable away from home. At the predominately white colleges I attended, it was accepted that students might feel overwhelmed by separation from their norm environment, that we might feel estranged, alienated, that we might in fact lose our minds. Therapy, I learned then, was the best way to face psychic wounds, the best way to heal. One of my younger sisters recently asked me: “how did you know you needed help?” I shared: “I knew I was not normal. I knew it was not normal to want to kill myself.” Intensely sad suicidal longings led me to therapy but in those early years therapy did not help. I could not find a therapist who would acknowledge the power of geographical location, of ancestral imprints, of racialized identity. Watching the comedy *Beverly Hillbillies* seemed to be the basis for most folks’ perceptions of the Kentucky backwoods, even therapeutic ones. And certainly in my early college years I lacked an adequate language to name all that had shaped and formed me.

Even when I felt therapy was not helping I did not lose my conviction that there was health to be found, that healing could come from understanding the past and connecting it to the present. Baba, my maternal grandmother, would often ask me, “how can you live so far away from your people?” When she posed this question I always felt it carried with it a rebuke, the slight insistence that I had been disloyal, betrayed the ancestral legacy by leaving home. The question I asked myself was “why when Kentucky means so much can’t you go home and stay home?” In my early twenties I began to construct a narrative map of the past, to write down the experiences of childhood that I felt were vital imprints. I began by making a list — thinking all the while about the stories we tell someone about ourselves when we meet and begin the process of getting to know one another. It was clear to me that I shared the same tales I thought were significant over and over again. I felt certain that if I could just put these memories on paper

and order them, it would help me to bring order to my life. Creating a clear detailed account of “myself,” I felt certain that I would then be able to stand back and see myself in a new way, no longer fragmented — whole — complete.

Writing my girlhood life helped. It gave me new ground to stand on. I collected these memories and published them in the memoir *Bone Black*. Poetic in style and tone, abstract even, I read and hear these accounts of my girlhood as though the speaker is in a trance, in a state that is at once removed and yet present. Much of my life away from Kentucky was lived in a trance state, as though I was always there and not there at the same time. Working to heal, to be whole has been a process of awakening, of moving from trance into reality, of learning how to be fully present. Leaving home evoked extreme feelings of abandonment and loss. It was like dying. Resurrecting the memories of home, bringing the bits and pieces together was a movement back that enabled me to move forward. All my trance states were defenses against the terrors of childhood. When I left home, I took with me unresolved traumas. Carrying the voices of my ancestors within me everywhere I called home, I carried remembered pain and allowed it to continually sweep me away. This sensation of being swept away was like spinning.

Away from Kentucky my heart was spinning, and it was only when the spinning stopped that I could see clearly and heal. Initially this clarity did not lead me to return to Kentucky. Indeed, I feared that if I returned home to Kentucky, I would be shattered, triggered in ways that would disrupt and fragment. I could be most adamantly a Kentuckian away from Kentucky. Since my native place was indeed the site and origin of the deep dysfunction that had damaged my spirit, I did not believe I could be safe there. I could see the connection between private family dysfunction, and the public dysfunction that was sanctioned by the State of Kentucky. Wayne Krietsberg offers a useful definition of dysfunction in his book *Healing Together*, clarifying that: “A dysfunctional family is one that is consistently unable to provide a safe

nurturing environment. Through its maladaptive behaviors, the family develops a set of restrictions that inhibit the social and emotional growth of its members, particularly the children. The healthy family on the other hand provides safety and nurturing for its members and assists them in their development by setting firm but reasonable limits, rather than imposing rigid constraints.” The fundamentalist Christian patriarchal power that determined the public world of the State in my native place was mirrored in the structure of my primary family life and family values. Concurrently, white supremacy shaped the psyches of black and white folks in ways that constrained and deformed.

Making the connections between geographical location and psychological states of being was useful for me. It empowered me to recognize the serious dysfunctional aspect of the southern world I was raised in, the ways internalized racism affected our emotional intelligence, our emotional life and yet it also revealed the positive aspects of my upbringing, the strategies of resistance that were life-enhancing. Certainly racial separatism, in conjunction with resistance to racism and white supremacy, empowered non-conforming black folks to create a sub-culture based on oppositional values. Those oppositional values imprinted on my psyche early in childhood enabled me to develop a survivalist will to resist that stood me in good stead both during the times I returned home and in the wilderness of spirit I dwelled in away from home. Oppositional habits learned during childhood forged a tie to my native place that could not be severed.

Growing up, renegade black and white folks who perceived the backwoods, the natural environment, to be a space away from man-made constructions, from dominator culture, were able to create unique habits of thinking and being that were in resistance to the status quo. This spirit of resistance had characterized much of Kentucky’s early history, the way in which white colonizers first perceived it an untouched truly wild wilderness that would resist being tamed by the forces of imperialist white supremacist capitalism. Even though the forces of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy did

ultimately subordinate the land to its predatory interests, it did not create a closed system. Individual Kentuckians, white and black, still managed to create sub-culture, usually in hollows, hills, and mountains, governed by beliefs and values contrary to those of mainstream culture. The free thinking and non-conformist behavior encouraged in the backwoods was a threat to imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, hence the need to undermine them by creating the notion that folks who inhabited these spaces were ignorant, stupid, inbred, ungovernable. By dehumanizing the hillbilly, the anarchist spirit which empowered poor folks to choose a lifestyle different from that of the State and so-called civilized society could be crushed. And if not totally crushed, at least made to appear criminal or suspect.

This spirit of resistance and revolution that has been nurtured in me by generations of Kentucky black folks who had chosen self-reliance and self-determination over dependency on any government provided the catalysts for my personal struggle for self-definition. The core of that resisting oppositional culture was an insistence on each of us being people of worth and dignity. Acknowledging one's worth meant that one had to choose to be a person of integrity, to stand by one's word. In my girlhood I was taught by my elders, many of whom had not been formally educated and lacked basic skills of reading and writing, that to be a person of integrity one had to always tell the truth and always assume responsibility for your actions. Particularly, my maternal grandmother Baba taught me that these values should ground my being, no matter my chosen place or country. To live these values then, I would, she taught, need to learn courage — the courage of my convictions, the courage to own mistakes and make reparation, the courage to take a stand.

In retrospect I have often wondered if her insistence on my always being dedicated to truth, a woman of my word, a woman of integrity was the lesson learned by heart that would ultimately make it impossible for me to feel at home away from my native place, away from my people. Striving to live with integrity made it difficult for me to

find joy in life away from the homefolk and landscape of my upbringing. And as the elders who had generously given of their stories, their wisdom, their lives to make it possible for me, and folks like me, to live well, more fully, began to pass away, it was only a matter of time before I would be called to remembrance, to carry their metaphysical legacy into the present. Among illiterate backwoods folk I had been taught values, given ethical standards by which to live my life. Those standards had little meaning in the world beyond the small Kentucky black communities I had known all my life.

If growing up in an extremely dysfunctional family of origin had made me “crazy,” surviving and making home away from my native place allowed me to draw on the positive skills I had learned during my growing up years. Kentucky was the only place I had lived where there were living elders teaching values, accepting eccentricity, letting me know by their example that to be fully self-actualized was the only way to truly heal. They revealed to me that the treasures I was seeking were already mine. All my longing to belong, to find a culture of place, all the searching I did from city to city, looking for that community of like-minded souls that was waiting for me in Kentucky, waiting for me to remember and reclaim. Away from my home state I often found myself among people who saw me as clinging to old-fashioned values, who pitied me because I did not know how to be opportunistic or play the games that would help me get ahead.

I am reminded of this tension causing duality of desire when I read Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the play she dramatizes the conflicts that emerge when the values of belonging, the old ways, collide with the values of enterprise, and career opportunism. Sad that her son wants to take the insurance money they have received on the death of her husband, Mama declares: “Since when did not money become life.” Walter Lee answers: “It was always life mama. We just did not know it.” No doubt masses of black folk fleeing the agrarian South for the freedom from racist exploitation and oppression they imagined would not be their lot in the industrialized

North felt an ongoing conflict of values. Leaving the agrarian past meant leaving cultures of belonging and community wherein resources were shared for a culture of liberal individualism. There is very little published work that looks at the psychological turmoil black folks faced as they made serious geographical changes that brought with them new psychological demands.

Certainly when I left Kentucky with its old-fashioned values about how to relate in the world, I was overwhelmed by the lack of integrity I encountered in the world away from home. Most folks scoffed at the notion that it was important to be honest, to be a person of one's word. This lack of integrity seemed to surface all the more intensely when I moved to New York City to further my career as a writer. During these years away from my native place, I often felt confusion and despair. My fundamentalist Christian upbringing had taught me to consider the meaning of sin as missing the mark. During those times in my life, I often felt I was missing the mark, failing to live in accordance with the core values I believed should be the foundation of my identity. I struggled psychologically to repair the damages to my soul inflicted by my trespasses and those who trespassed against me.

Becoming successful as a cultural critic and creative writer, away from my native place, I was consistently astounded when readers and reviewers who wrote about my work failed to mention the extent to which the culture of place I had known in Kentucky shaped my writing and my vision. Surprised when the literary world did not acknowledge the significance of my Kentucky roots, I felt a greater necessity to articulate the role of homeplace in my artistic vision. Often critics would talk about my southern roots, never naming a specific location for those roots. To some extent this failure to focus on Kentucky was linked to assumptions about whether Kentucky really was the "South." I would tell people that growing up black in Kentucky we experienced our world as southern, as not very different from other southern places, like Alabama and Georgia. It may very well be that the culture of whiteness in Kentucky has characteristics that would

not be seen as distinctly southern but certainly the sub-cultures black folks created and create were formed by the understanding of what it meant to be black people in the South. For all the talk about Kentucky as a border state, the culture of slavery, of racial apartheid had won the day in the state despite places in the region that had sprouted fierce assertions of civil rights for all. Certainly, reading the biographical and autobiographical memoirs of black Kentuckians, one learns of a world shaped by feudal forces of imperialist white supremacist capitalism, but one also learns of all the inventive ways black folks deployed to survive and thrive in the midst of exploitation and oppression.

During the more than thirty years that I did not make my home in Kentucky, much that I did not like about life in my home state (the cruel racist exploitation and oppression that continued from slavery into the present day, the disenfranchisement of poor and/or hill-billy people, the relentless assault on nature) was swiftly becoming the norm everywhere. Throughout our nation the dehumanization of poor people, the destruction of nature for capitalist development, the disenfranchisement of people of color, especially African-Americans, the resurgence of white supremacy and with it plantation culture, have become an accepted way of life. Yet returning to my home state after all the years that I was living away, I found there essential remnants of a culture of belonging, a sense of the meaning and vitality of geographical place.

All the positive aspects of a culture of belonging that Kentucky offered me were not present in other places. And maybe it would have been harder for me to return to my native place if I had not consistently sustained and nurtured bonds of kin and family despite living away. My last lengthy place of residence prior to becoming a resident of Kentucky was New York City. Had anyone ever predicted when I was younger that I would one day live in Manhattan, I would have responded: "that is never gonna' happen — cause I am a country girl through and through." Concurrently, had I been told that I would return in mid-life to live in Kentucky, I would have responded: "when

they send my ashes home.” New York City was one of the few places in the world where I experienced loneliness for the first time. I attributed this to the fact that there one lives in close proximity to so many people engaging in a kind of pseudo intimacy but rarely genuinely making community. To live in close contact with neighbors, to see them every day but to never engage in fellowship was downright depressing. People I knew in the city often ridiculed the idea that one would want to live in community — what they loved about the city was the intense anonymity, not knowing and not being accountable. At times I did feel a sense of community in the city and endeavored to live in the West Village as though it was a small town. Bringing my Kentucky ways with me wherever I made homeplace sustained my ties to home, and also made it possible for me to return home.

My decision to make my home in Kentucky did not emerge from any sentimental assumption that I would find an uncorrupted world in my native place. Rather, I knew I would find there living remnants of all that was wonderful in the world of my growing up. During my time away, I would return to Kentucky and feel again a sense of belonging that I never felt elsewhere, experiencing unbroken ties to the land, to homefolk, to our vernacular speech. Even though I had lived for so many years away from my people, I was fortunate that there was a place and homefolk for me to return to, that I was welcomed. Coming back to my native place I embrace with true love the reality that “Kentucky is my fate” — my sublime home.